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Pattern of conferences

Interpretation and translation issues referred to in section III, paragraphs 13 to 15, of General Assembly resolution 52/220

Report of the Secretary-General

1. The General Assembly in paragraphs 13 to 15 of section III of its resolution 52/220 of 22 December 1997, noted with concern the abolition of 30 posts of translator and interpreter and the practices with respect to self-revision, which may attain proportions of 80 per cent during periods of peak workload, whereas the specified standard is 45 per cent. The Assembly requested the Secretary-General to keep those two issues under review, in the light of its resolution 50/11 of 2 November 1995, and to report to the General Assembly at its fifty-third session, through the Committee on Conferences, on their impact on the quality of conference services provided. This report is submitted pursuant to that request.

A. Abolition of posts

2. In the context of the proposed programme budget for the biennium 1998–1999, a careful selection was made of posts for abolition, so as to preserve the core functions of conference services: interpretation and translation. The majority of the reductions were in documents processing and support functions and reflect past investments in technological innovations.

3. At the same time, it was considered that language services should not be exempt from the same scrutiny being applied in other areas and the opportunity was taken to propose some rationalization of language services. It should be noted that interpreter and translator posts are not budgeted by language, but may be occupied at different times by staff from various language units.

4. The following interpreter posts were abolished: in New York, three P-2s; in Geneva, six P-2s and three P-3s; in Vienna, five P-3s. This gives a total of 17 interpreter posts: nine

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at the P-2 level and eight at the P-3 level. As interpreters are not recruited at the P-2 level, these posts had not been used for permanent staff and their abolition will thus have no effect on permanent capacity or requirements for temporary assistance and no impact on actual costs or the provision of services. Translators recruited at the P-2 level are normally promoted after two years of satisfactory service.

5. The following translator posts were abolished: in New York, two P-2s; in Geneva, four P-3s; in Vienna, seven P-3s. This gives a total of 13 translator posts: two at the P-2 level and eleven at the P-3 level.

6. In Geneva, in order to make better use of permanent capacity, the abolitions proposed were intended to achieve a distribution of posts that would ensure proportionality among languages. Vacant posts or posts under recruitment were reassigned to other language sections in order to get close to the ideal proportion. These measures were intended to increase the overall productivity of the permanent establishment and to equalize the workload per interpreter and per translator in all languages.

7. In Vienna, the proposed staffing was also based on an analysis of needs, taking into account the reduction in the workload for United Nations Industrial Development Organization as well as the ability to fill posts, some of which had been vacant since 1986.

8. The programme budget proposals were thus intended to preserve the efficiency and level of conference services available to Member States, with full implementation of programmed mandates and without the difficulties resulting from the economy measures implemented during 1996–1997.

9. In fact, interpretation and translation capacity is being strengthened during 1998–1999 in comparison with 1996–1997, since posts in the interpretation and translation services, which had remained vacant in order to implement mandated vacancy rates, are being filled, including six new translator posts in New York approved for 1996–1997.

B. Self-revision[1]

10. Over the years, the increase in the volume of parliamentary documentation and the concomitant decrease in the resources of all Translation Services led to more reliance on methods of work allowing for higher productivity, including self-revision. Unless corrective measures are taken to ensure that a high quality of translation is maintained, however, the benefits derived from an extensive application of that method are more than offset by a lessening of the overall quality of translation.

11. Before 1981, the traditional method of having original texts translated initially by relatively junior language staff, the translators, and then revised by more senior and more experienced members of the translation services, the revisers, was the only method used at the United Nations. The introduction of "self-revision"was intended, *inter alia,* to accelerate the production of translated texts. Under that system, self-revising translators are expected to take a second critical look at their own initial drafts, thus obviating the need for further review at a distinct "revision"stage. However, as noted with remarkable candour in a report submitted at a session of the Inter-Agency Meeting on Language Arrangements, Documentation and Publications (IAMLADP) in July 1997, self-revision is a euphemism for "no revision"and it is clear that there must be limits in terms of who is entrusted with self-revision and what material is suitable for self-revision in order to avoid a negative impact on quality.

12. In that connection, it will be recalled that when the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions (ACABQ), in 1980, approved self-revision as a new translation mode, it was agreed that the percentage of the material so processed would not exceed 45 per cent. This limitation was based on the new staffing structure of translation services, with a higher ratio of P-4/P-5 posts to P-3 posts, as well as on the understanding that sensitive documents, including resolutions of the principal organs of the United Nations and most of the Security Council documentation would always need to be revised and that, for material suitable for self-revision, only translators and revisers with the necessary experience and training could be expected to deliver self-revised translations meeting quality standards.

13. At Headquarters, the average rate of self-revision over the period from April 1997 to March 1998 was 47.8 per cent, not far from the ratio recommended by ACABQ and the General Assembly. At Geneva and Vienna, corresponding averages are 61.8 and 64.4 per cent, respectively. However, it must be stressed that higher rates have, until recently, been experienced in the various translation services at Headquarters and elsewhere during peak workload periods, in excess of 70 per cent in some services. Within the limitations owing to the volume and the deadlines of the workload, systematic efforts have been made therefore to ensure that sensitive or complex texts continue to be revised and that appropriate emphasis be placed on the revising function. In that connection, an analysis of the individual workload of self-revising translators at the P-4 level and senior revisers at the P-5 level at Headquarters over the same period (April 1997–March 1998) has shown that the share of straight revision work was roughly 40 per cent for the former and 61 per cent for the latter. The job description for P-4 staff has been revised in order to reflect the importance of the revising function and the functional title has been amended from "self-revising translator"to "reviser/self-revising translator". All posts at the P-4 level have been reclassified accordingly, and the distribution of assignments reflects these changes.

14. At the same time, a number of measures have been taken to reconcile quality requirements and a sustained high rate of self-revision, particularly in the areas of training and quality control. Special attention has been given to the training for self-revision of relatively experienced translators at the P-3 level. Taking into account their academic backgrounds and demonstrated areas of strength after a few years of experience, they are "specialized"in several subject matters. Subject to consistently satisfactory performance, they are asked to produce self-revised translations, which are subject to quality control by revisers and senior revisers. Systematic feedback is provided in the form of occasional corrections to their translations and one-on-one discussions with revisers. Translators at the P-3 level and revisers/self-revising translators at the P-4 level have increasingly been given the opportunity to expand and/or improve their language skills by attending courses of study at various universities. Thus, in the summer of 1998, some 20 members of the New York translation services at those levels have been selected to attend courses at universities in France, Jordan, Russia and Spain. Finally, in some translation services, seminars or group discussions have been organized to increase awareness of the requirements of delegations.

15. In the area of quality control, a number of measures have been continued or expanded to improve the quality of self-revised translation. The production of relatively inexperienced self-revisers is systematically monitored by senior staff and in some cases subject to a "peer review", which allows translators who are relatively new to self-revision to share among themselves the experience they are gradually acquiring. Quality control is not applied only to the production of new self-revisers, however. In all services, the Chief and the senior staff spot-check all self-revised texts, including those by relatively experienced translators. Furthermore, when a long document is split among several self-revising translators, a necessity when short deadlines have to be met, a senior reviser is normally assigned the task

of reading the entire translated text, with a view to ensuring consistency in terminology and style in particular.

16. In accordance with the request by the General Assembly, the issue of self-revision will continue to be kept under review at all conference centres, both in terms of the volume of work carried out using that method and in terms of the effectiveness of the measures implemented to ensure a high quality of translation.

Notes

[1] The text of paragraphs 11 to 15 of the present report has been extracted from a report submitted to the Committee on Conferences on translation-related matters pursuant to General Assembly resolution 52/214, "Pattern of Conferences" (A/AC.172/1998/CRP.6).